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PRIME MINISTER

ENGAGEMENTS

Q1. Mr. Marlow

asked the Prime Minister whether she will list her official engagements for 22 April.

The Prime Minister (Mrs. Margaret Thatcher)

This morning I presided at a meeting of the Cabinet and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further meetings later today. This evening I hope to attend a dinner given by the Civic Trust.

Mr. Marlow

Despite the strong action taken by my right hon. Friend, and despite also the Government's proper desire for a diplomatic solution, both of which have the full support of the nation, has my right hon. Friend noticed reports that General Galtieri is on his way to the Falkland Islands? Does she agree that that provocative move will not help to achieve a peaceful settlement?

The Prime Minister

I confirm that we strive for a diplomatic and peaceful solution. Nothing that General Galtieri can do by visiting the islands today alters the fact that the islands are under British sovereignty. Neither invasion nor a visit can alter that. The best thing that can be done is to implement United Nations resolution 502 by the withdrawal of Argentine troops. That resolution was passed nearly three weeks ago.

Mr. David Steel

Did the Cabinet decide this morning to defer publication of the defence White Paper? If so, will it be rewritten to reverse the rundown in naval manpower?

[column 417]

The Prime Minister

Preparations for the White Paper are complete, but the White Paper is not complete. I do not know when it will be ready to be published, but not next week.

Mr. Higgins

While we must all hope that the Argentine Government will now comply with resolution 502 and the wishes of the House, if they fail to do so, will my right hon. Friend consider going back to the Security Council and asking for economic sanctions, so that we can see who is prepared to stand up and be counted in the battle against aggressors, and we can be seen to have exhausted all other possible means of persuasion short of military force?

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friend knows that at the moment we are concentrating on negotiations through the good offices of Mr. Haig. If those fail, of course we shall consider what other actions should be taken. I can only remind my right hon. Friend that the history of economic sanctions and their effectiveness is not good.

Dr. Owen

Will the Prime Minister confirm that South Georgia is a direct dependency and is only administered by the Falkland Islands governor and that no Government have ever been prepared to countenance any change in that position in discussions with the Argentine? Will she confirm, further, that there are major British interests in relation to the Antarctic and South Georgia?

The Prime Minister

I confirm what the right hon. Gentleman has said. South Georgia was administered as a matter of convenience through the governorship of the Falkland Islands. Our title to it is different from that to the Falkland Islands. It is a separate dependency. It is extremely important—for the reasons that the right hon. Gentleman gave, among others.

Q2. Mr. Jim Marshall

asked the Prime Minister if she will list her official engagements for Thursday 22 April.

The Prime Minister

I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply that I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Marshall

I refer to the Prime Minister's earlier answer. Is she prepared to give an undertaking that no force will be used, either against the East or West Falkland Islands, until all avenues of diplomacy, including the United Nations, have been fully explored and exhausted?

The Prime Minister

I confirm what my right hon. Friend Francis Pym the Foreign Secretary said yesterday, that while we are making every effort to secure a peaceful settlement, the use of force cannot be ruled out.

Mr. Ernie Ross

Will the Prime Minister take time today to study the reports of the Israeli aggression in Lebanon yesterday? Does she agree that this break in the ceasefire by the Israelis is unprovoked aggression and is yet another step towards an invasion of Southern Lebanon? Will she take time today to condemn that action?

The Prime Minister

I think that the whole House will have noted what happened yesterday, will have noted it with concern, and will hope that it will give rise to no more hostilities in that region and that the withdrawal from Sinai will continue on time.

Mr. Aitken

Will my right hon. Friend find time today to examine the record of the Argentine junta in failing to [column 418]honour certain important international agreements? In particular, will she note the fact that in recent months the junta has dishonoured its international agreement to uphold the authority of the Pope as mediator in the dispute with Chile? Against that background, what possible confidence can Her Majesty's Government have that any agreement that is signed by the Argentine junta is worth the paper that it is written on?

The Prime Minister

I am well aware of what happened in the dispute to which my hon. Friend refers. I think that another meeting has been called by the Pope on the dispute between Argentine and Chile and that it will take place in the coming two days. It is for the reasons that my hon. Friend adduces that we should watch very carefully the task force and its presence until the withdrawal of those troops is complete.

Mr. Foot

While we are all, of course, still deeply concerned about the Falklands crisis, may I return to the question that was put by my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) about the other crisis on the borders of Lebanon and Israel? Have the Government made representations on the matter, and are we giving support to the Secretary-General's demands that there should be a re-establishment of the ceasefire? Does this not further illustrate how much we are all dependent, large nations and small, on absolute allegiance to the United Nations charter and the determination to carry it out all over the world?

The Prime Minister

We hope that that ceasefire will not be broken again. I can, of course, assure the right hon. Gentleman that we are doing everything that we can through diplomatic channels to urge restraint, so that the situation does not get worse.

Mr. Edward Gardner

Is my right hon. Friend aware that those of us, from both sides of the House, who have just returned from the spring meeting of the IPU in Lagos found that delegates from all parts of the Commonwealth recognised the justice of our cause and expressed firm and unequivocal support for what Her Majesty's Government are now doing to deal with the crisis with the Argentine?

The Prime Minister

I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend. I think that nations almost everywhere recognise that unprovoked aggression must not be seen to succeed, for if it does not only will it be impossible for the people of the Falkland Islands but for many other peoples across the globe.

Mr. Spearing

As the Argentine Government are still defying United Nations resolution 502, does that not put a greater obligation on the Security Council and all those members of the United Nations who have condemned Argentine aggression? Can the right hon. Lady now assure the House that the policy and action of Her Majesty's Government will be to retain the support of all those countries which have condemned Argentine aggression, but which may have other views about wider aspects of the matter?

The Prime Minister

It is certainly true that some countries may have their own views about the actual sovereignty of the Falkland Islands, but most of them have condemned the unprovoked aggression and would support us in securing the withdrawal of the Argentine forces. They would also recognise that we, too, have rights of self-defence under article 51 of the United Nations charter.

[column 419]

Q3. Mr. Heddle

asked the Prime Minister if she will list her official engagements for Thursday 22 April.

The Prime Minister

I refer my hon. Friend to the reply that I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Heddle

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Argentine people have no cause to thank their Government for a rate of inflation of around 140 per cent.? Does she further agree that our rate of inflation is continuing its downward spiral and is on target to fall below 10 per cent. this year? Furthermore, will my right hon. Friend take heart today at the announcement that, together with Japan and France, Great Britain is likely to emerge from the world recession well ahead of our industrial competitors?

The Prime Minister

I confirm what my hon. Friend has said. The rate of inflation is falling, is continuing to fall, and we expect that it will be below 10 per cent. well before the end of the year. I also confirm that there are forecasts now which point out that the recovery will quicken in this country in the coming year and will be at least as good as that of our major international competitors, and in some cases better.

Mr. Gordon Wilson

In relation to the Argentine, does the Prime Minister realise that if the Government engage in hostilities before the processes of negotiation have been fully and adequately carried out, a lot of the support that she has received

in the House, and at home and abroad, will disappear like snow off the dike on a hot spring day? Will she, therefore, in pursuit of negotiations for a peaceful settlement, consider the transfer of sovereignty to the United Nations—[Hon. Members: “No.”]—so that the people living in the Falkland Islands will be able to have their security guaranteed by an international body?

The Prime Minister

I cannot rule out the use of force. The process of negotiations could go on endlessly. There is a maritime exclusion zone. We must also expect that we have a right of self-defence under article 51 of the charter for islands that have been invaded. Of course we would all prefer, and will do everything possible to seek, a peaceful settlement, but, as the hon. Gentleman will understand, that it is not easy, particularly when seeking a settlement with a country, some of whose people say that they will withdraw only if they succeed in obtaining sovereignty as the price of that withdrawal.

Mrs. Knight

Will the Prime Minister dissociate herself from those who suggest that the British flag is just another piece of cloth, and those who consider that it might be a convenient ploy to have it fluttering side by side with the Argentine flag, even before the people of the Falklands have had an opportunity to make their decision clear? Will she stress again the vital importance of the symbolism of the British flag?

The Prime Minister

Yes, of course. To all of us here, and in particular to the Falklands, the flag is a great symbol of pride and allegiance to the Crown. No one would quarrel for a moment with that statement.

Q4. Mr. Parry

asked the Prime Minister if she will list her official engagements for Thursday 22 April.

[column 420]

The Prime Minister

I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply that I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Parry

Will the Prime Minister now offer her resignation, in view of the revelation that her Government have recently been supplying arms to the Argentine that may be used against the Falklanders and British forces? Is that not tantamount to treasonable conduct?

The Prime Minister

If the hon. Gentleman looks at the history of the supply of arms to the Argentine he will find that a number of contracts were negotiated during the lifetime of his own Government.

Mr. Hastings

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the truly remarkable achievement of the Royal Navy and the other Services in mounting this task force with such efficiency and speed has been insufficiently recognised to date? Does she further agree that any continuing plea for a restriction of the use of force, or some other kind of compromise, can serve only to bring comfort and strength to the junta and thus increase the risk of further miscalculation on its part, and loss of life?

The Prime Minister

I agree with my hon. Friend that the speed with which the Royal Navy assembled the task force, and its efficiency throughout, have been matters of pride for us all. I entirely agree with him that sending the task force efficiently and well-equipped is a factor that is more likely to lead the junta to a peaceful settlement than would have been the case without it.

Q5. Mr. Thomas Cox

asked the Prime Minister if she will list her official engagements for 22 April.

The Prime Minister

I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply that I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Cox

Is the Prime Minister aware that her attitude towards the Fascist junta in the Argentine contrasts with the lack of action by her Government towards another Fascist junta, that in Turkey, which is still occupying part of a Commonwealth country, Cyprus? What is her attitude to that occupation? What action is she taking to have those troops removed? What will she do if the general in Ankara refuses to remove Turkish troops from Cyprus?

The Prime Minister

I understand that the military Government in Turkey have said that they intend to return to democratic Government as soon as possible. They have indicated to the European Community a timetable under which they hope to achieve that.

Dr. Mawhinney

Does my right hon. Friend agree that if a democracy is unwilling to defend its own territory or people against conventional armed attack after, and only after, all peace negotiations have been exhausted, it might find that its credibility is seriously damaged when it comes together with other democracies in an organisation such as NATO?

The Prime Minister

I fully agree with my hon. Friend. One must be prepared to defend those things in which one believes and be prepared to use force if it is the only way to secure a future of liberty and self-determination.